

Lent 2005

The Hell Jesus never intended

An overview by Keith Wright in 5 sessions

Week of Lent 5: Heaven as Past, Present, and Future

Several theologians ranging from **Friedrich Schleiermacher** to **Paul Tillich** developed a concept of Heaven that is called "realized eschatology." Eschatology is the study of the "last things" or the "end times." In her book, *The End of the World and the Ends of God*, **Kathryn Tanner** argues that the end of time does not point to a particular time in the future. Rather, there is a continuum of end time that corresponds to the unfolding of God's creative purposes, manifest in the evolutionary process of the universe.

Reward or redemption

The problem with the traditional view of Heaven as a place of future rewards is that it often ignores God's concern with redeeming and filling the present life with happiness, meaning, and pleasures.

The Sense of the Holy and the presence of God

Any understanding of Heaven is incomplete if it fails to see that God desires that the present moment be filled with a sense of the Holy and the presence of God - that we experience joy and laughter; that pain and suffering be diminished; that justice and compassion prevail; that human needs for food, shelter, and clothing be met; that we be surrounded by the companionship and warmth of friends and family; that we have meaningful work to do and outlets for our creative abilities.

Heaven ... Hell

The concept of Heaven on earth has deep biblical roots. Hebrews did not believe in either Heaven or Hell until just a few centuries before the birth of Jesus. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites thought in terms of God's blessings poured out ... *in this life.*

Jesus

For Christians, God's supreme effort is put forth in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this Godfilled man, we learn that the very nature of God is love and that through those who follow that way of love, God's Kingdom is brought to fruition on this earth. As Jesus began his ministry, Matthew says, he "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." (Matthew 4:23)

Matthew gathers together the essence of Jesus' teaching in what we have come to call "The Sermon on the Mount." (Matthew 5-7) In that sermon, Jesus describes the attitudes and actions that move us toward God's promised kingdom and that bring us the happiness and fulfillment we seek.

As you look at the Beatitudes and the rest of this sermon, you realize that Jesus is not talking about what you must do to get to Heaven when you die. He is talking about what you must do in order to experience the kingdom right now. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven." Not theirs *will be*... but "theirs is" the kingdom of Heaven.

Revelation of God

Jesus tells us that we can find a foretaste of Heaven in this life. ... We find the true nature of God - a revelation that gives us the motivation and courage to begin the journey down that path to wholeness and life. In Jesus' death and resurrection, God demonstrates that the power of evil does not have the final say, and so we find confidence to stay on the path and to know that love will ultimately prevail despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Justice, peace and compassion

Because we believe this, we keep working for justice and peace. Because we believe this, we try to build a society where the weak and poor and powerless are defended

and given aid. Because we believe this, we build our lives on compassion and truth and try to reflect these virtues in our relationship with others.

The hope of resurrection promises that what began at creation and continues through this life does not end at death but has a future. "Realized eschatology" is a much-needed correction to a "pie in the sky" faith that ignores the difficulties and the possibilities of this life. It reminds us that God did not create this world simply as a stepping-stone to a life to come. This life has meaning and value in and of itself.

Limitations of realized eschatology.

Heaven on earth is never complete, never fully realized. This life is filled with too much difficulty and pain to be the whole story. Some people live long, fruitful lives, but many other lives are cut tragically short. Some people have an abundance of this world's material goods, while others barely eke out a living. Some people live relatively pain free lives, while others are wracked with pain. Some people are blessed with health and competence, while others are severely limited mentally and physically. Surely, a God of justice and mercy and love cannot be satisfied with a human lifespan that is so short, so uneven, so incomplete - even in the best of circumstances. **Polkinghorne** reminds us, "Without a transcendent future, many are condemned to a loss of good that no process solely within history could ever restore to them. In fact, all of us are so condemned, even if we have the good fortune to die in honored and pious old age. We shall all die with unfinished business and incompleteness in our lives. There must be more to hope for."

Near Death experiences

Our desire, our need, to believe that life goes on after death cannot be proven by the accounts of those who have had "near death experiences." But some would argue that

such proof is not necessary anyway, because the Christian faith has the ultimate proof in the resurrection of Jesus and his appearances to his disciples after his death. Here we have the hard evidence, they say, the physical evidence that should remove all doubt. Christians across the centuries have taken comfort in the biblical claim that in the resurrection of Jesus, God conquered sin and death and opened the gates of Heaven for all who believed in him.

Resurrection

We must rely on conflicting accounts from people who lived 2,000 years ago. Those accounts can leave us with as many questions as answers. If you look closely at the Easter stories as recorded in the four gospels, you will find that they actually reveal insurmountable discrepancies and inconsistencies.

1. There were no eyewitnesses to the resurrection itself.
2. There is no agreement about the persons to whom Jesus revealed himself after the Resurrection.
3. There is no consensus on the sequence or the locality of these appearances.

If our belief in Heaven and eternal life is dependent upon historically verifiable evidence, we will not find it in the resurrection accounts. **Hans Kung** writes,

"Insofar as it is a question of entering into God's eternal life beyond time and space, this is a life that cannot be established by the means and methods of historical research."

Basis of our trust

We cannot prove by pointing to Jesus' resurrection that Heaven is a fact. In the final analysis, belief is always based upon trust rather than certainty. But reasonable trust is far different from wishful thinking. Our trust is based upon

1. the purposefulness of God revealed in creation,
2. in God's deep concern for justice,

- peace, and the well-being of all the peoples of the earth, and
3. in the image of God as compassionate parent and suffering servant that we find in Jesus Christ.
 4. the reasonable confidence that the God who called this world and us from non-being into being can also call us from death to life.
 5. the reasonable assumption that the Creator has something more in mind beyond the limits of what we have experienced up to this point.

Heaven, then, is a complete package, not a one-dimensional place of future rewards. It assures us that our origin is in God, that our present life is of great concern to God, and that our future is in God's hands. In this three-dimensional trust, we find the call to reflect God's compassion and justice in an imperfect world. We believe that this is what God intended. And we believe that God's love will be the essential nature of whatever is yet to come.